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ABSTRACT

Fables and trickster stories are short narratives that use animal characters with human features to convey folk wisdom and to help people understand human nature and human behavior. These stories were originally passed down through oral tradition and were eventually written down. These lesson plans are intended for students in grades 3-5 and introduce them to folk tales through a literary approach that emphasizes genre categories and definitions. With these lessons, students will become familiar with fables and trickster tales from different cultural traditions and will see how stories change when transferred orally between generations and cultures. They will learn how both fables and trickster tales use various animals in different ways to portray human strengths and weaknesses to pass down wisdom from one generation to the next. The general lesson plan: provides an introduction; cites subject areas, time required, and skills developed; gives learning objectives; poses guiding questions; presents material about teaching the lesson; outlines suggested activities for four lessons (Telling Stories-Writing Stories; Fables and Tales from Different Cultures; Sly as a Fox: Busy as a Bee; The Moral of the Story; and Extending the Lesson); lists selected Websites; and addresses standards alignment. (NKA)

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EDsitement Lesson Plan.

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Fables and Trickster Tales Around the World

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES
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GRADES 3-5

Introduction

Fables and trickster stories are short narratives that use animal characters with human features to convey folk wisdom and to help us understand human nature and human behavior. These stories were originally passed down through oral tradition and were eventually written down. The legendary figure Aesop was reported to have orally passed on his animal fables, which have been linked to earlier beast tales from India and were later written down by the Greeks and Romans. Ananse trickster tales derive from the Asante people of Ghana and were brought by African slaves to the Caribbean and parts of the U.S. These tales developed into Brer Rabbit stories and were written down in the 19th century in the American South.

The following lessons introduce children to folk tales through a literary approach that emphasizes genre categories and definitions. In this unit, students will become familiar with fables and trickster tales from different cultural traditions and will see how stories change when transferred orally between generations and cultures. They will learn how both fables and trickster tales use various animals in different ways to portray human strengths and weaknesses in order to pass down wisdom from one generation to the next.

This unit is related to the lesson Aesop and Ananse: Animal Fables and Trickster Tales, which provides the same background information for the teacher with different activities appropriate for students in grades K-2. Please note that different versions of spellings of "Ananse" and "Anansi," and of "Asante," "Ashante," and "Ashanti" exist.

Learning Objectives

After completing the lessons in this unit, students will be able to:

- Identify the definition and understand elements of fables and trickster stories
- Recognize Aesop's fables, Ananse spider stories, and related tales from various cultures
- List human traits associated with particular animals in fables and trickster stories
- Identify the specific narrative and thematic patterns that occur in many fables across cultures
- Compare and contrast themes of fables and trickster tales from different cultures
- Explain how fables and trickster tales are used in different cultural contexts to point out human strengths and weaknesses

Illustration from "A Tale About Little Rabbits." Taken from the first Remus volume (1881)
Courtesy of American Studies @ the University of Virginia

Subject Areas

Art and Culture
- Anthropology
- Folklore

History and Social Studies
- World History - Africa
- World History - Ancient World
- World History - Asia/Far East
- World History - Europe

Literature and Language Arts
- Fiction
- World

Time Required

Lesson 1: one class period

Lesson 2: one or two class periods

Lesson 3: one class period

Lesson 4: one class period

- Differentiate between the cautionary lessons and morals of fables and the celebration of the wiles and wit of the underdog in trickster stories.

Guiding Question:

What is a fable, and how are fables different from other types of stories? What is a trickster tale, and how is it different from other types of tales and from fables? How have fables and trickster tales been passed down through time and around the world? Which human qualities have been associated with different animals? Why do fables and trickster tales use animals to point out complexities in human nature and feelings? What kinds of wisdom about human nature and human behavior do we learn from fables, and how is this wisdom relevant today?

Preparing to Teach this Lesson

- Review each lesson in this unit and select archival materials you'd like to use in class. If possible, bookmark these materials, along with other useful Web sites; download and print out selected documents and duplicate copies as necessary for student viewing.

Skills

- Analyzing written and oral texts for plot, theme, and characterization
- Working collaboratively
- Comparing and contrasting
- Gathering, classifying, and interpreting written and oral information
- Making inferences and drawing conclusions
- Observing and describing

Additional Data

Date Created: 05/21/02

- Look over the essay, "The Talking Drum" and for background information on the process and purpose of fables in African traditions: "The Talking Drum is a metaphor for cultural communication that is based on the actual tool of ancestral instruction that has followed Afrikans, even in Diaspora. Indeed, there is a specific type of drum that is called just that. A Talking Drum; and it has been used to communicate good news and bad for generations untold. ... Ananse Stories were never really meant to be chiseled in stone, but were meant as templates for dispensing generational wisdom as it generally applied to everyday activities. That is, one made up an Ananse Story based on the wisdom of ancestors to deal with a present day situation that necessitated a nondirect response" (from IAHBING, "The Talking Drum.") For the cultural context of original Ananse stories, see the Asante Information page in Peoples Resources at Art and Life in Africa Online.

- Review the "Preface" on the Aesop's Fables Web site, linked through the EDSITEment-reviewed Web resource Internet Public Library. The "Preface" provides information on the history of Aesop's fables and on the definition of fables in general. The Aesop's Fables Web site notes: "It has been said that Aesop only created but a few of the Fables, but he is still regarded as the greatest story teller of all time, and thus fables are most always attributed to him" (from Aesop's Fables Online Collection, Detailed Information.)

- Look over the first two "Introduction to Korean Folklore" essays on the EDSITEment-reviewed Asia Source Web site for background information on Korean fables. The first essay provides the social and cultural context for Korean folktales; the second essay discusses the oral tradition and common features of Korean folktales and explains some meanings of specific folktales (from Korean Folktales).

- The Sanskrit collection *Panchatantra*, or *Pañcatantra*, another famous collection of fables, was composed between the 3rd century BC and the 4th century AD in India by Vishnusharman. Review background information on these fables from the India Timeline 1 from Central Oregon Community College, found on the EDSITEment-reviewed Web site Asia Source, Timelines and Chronologies, Timelines of Asia: Literary & Cultural History. This source states that, "Ancient folktales of India come down to us primarily in two collections of stories many of which are about animals. These are the Buddhist tales of the former lives of the Buddha known as the *Jatakas* and the *Panchatantra* [traditional Hindu animal stories considered a textbook for wise conduct in this

world]."

- Another source that offers background information on folktales and fables from India, the General Notes from Joseph Jacobs' Indian Fairy Tales, located on the EDSITEment-reviewed Web site Internet Public Library, discusses the lineage of Indian fables and the relationship between Indian and European fables. The General Notes state that, "When the Hindu reaction against Buddhism came, the Brahmins adapted these [Jatakas], with the omission of Buddha as the central figure. There is scarcely any doubt that the so-called *Fables of Bidpai* were thus derived from Buddhistic sources. In its Indian form this is now extant as a *Panchatantra* or *Pentateuch*, five books of tales connected by a Frame. This collection is of special interest to us in the present connection, as it has come to Europe in various forms and shapes."

- In the Preface to his Indian Fairy Tales, Joseph Jacobs writes, "There are even indications of an earlier literary contact between Europe and India, in the case of one branch of the folk-tale, the Fable or Beast Droll. In a somewhat elaborate discussion ["History of the Aesopic Fable," the introductory volume to my edition of Caxton's *Fables of Esope* (London, Nutt, 1889)] I have come to the conclusion that a goodly number of the fables that pass under the name of the Samian slave, Aesop, were derived from India, probably from the same source whence the same tales were utilised in the Jatakas, or Birth-stories of Buddha."

Suggested Activities

Lesson 1: Telling Stories - Writing Stories
Lesson 2: Fables and Tales from Different Cultures
Lesson 3: Sly as a Fox; Busy as a Bee
Lesson 4: The Moral of the Story
Extending the Lesson

Lesson 1 Telling Stories - Writing Stories

Read to the class the Asante tale from West Africa, "Ananse's Stories," which tells how a certain type of story came to be called Ananse Stories.

Point out the last two lines of the story as a piece of folk wisdom, a typical ending element of Ananse tales:

"And from that day the stories of the Ashante people and their descendants in the West Indies have been called Ananse Stories."

"And that is why Old People say: If yu follow trouble, trouble follow yu."

Have students identify characteristics of this story and use this list of elements to collaboratively devise a definition of a fable or trickster tale as a short narrative that uses animal characters with human features to convey some universal truth about human nature and human behavior and to pass down wisdom from earlier generations in ways that can be used for present-day situations. Point out to students that, while fables tend to end in moral or cautionary lessons, trickster tales often celebrate values or actions that are disapproved of by society but that may be necessary for the survival and success of the small and weak; together, fables and trickster stories allow us to see the complexities of the human character. Ask students what they think about the Spider character in the story, whether they like him and his actions, and why? Why is Spider called a "trickster"?

Use the information from Preparing the Lesson to discuss with students the notion of "the talking drum," a story that is passed orally through generations and cultures, and that changes as it moves from person to person and from place to place. Discuss with students the differences between telling and writing stories, and ask them what the advantages and disadvantages are of the oral and written forms.

Have students retell the tale from "Ananse's Stories" and note how the story changes in the retelling.

Lesson 2 Fables and Tales from Different Cultures

The following stories involve cases where the less powerful of two animals (including one human) who are natural enemies frees the more powerful animal. The divergent responses of the animals freed lead to different lessons about human behavior and values. Using the chart below, have students identify the characters, problem and solution, and moral of these fables.

"The Lion and the Mouse" (Aesop)
(another versions)

"Mr. Buffu and the Snake" (Ananse)

"The Tiger in the Trap" (Korean)

Have students fill out an online version or printed-out version of the Story Structure Chart:

	Title	Title	Title	Title
Story Elements				
Characters				
Problem				
Solution				
Lesson/Moral				

Ask students to compare the characters, plot, and lessons of these stories. Which characters did they like best? Which did they like least? Which story had the best ending? The best moral? To see how fables teach universal lessons about human nature and behavior, ask students to think of a real-life situation that applies to one of the stories.

B) Divide students into small groups and give each group one of the following fables/tales, located through the EDSITEment-reviewed Web site Internet Public Library, that offer lessons on the dangers of being too clever:

1. The Fish That Were Too Clever (India, The *Panchatantra*).
2. The Fox and the Cat (Aesop).
3. The Cat and the Fox (France, Jean de La Fontaine).
4. The Fox and the Cat (Germany, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm).
5. The Seven-Witted Fox and the One-Witted Owl (Romania).
6. The Fox and His Bagful of Wits and the One-Witted Hedgehog (Romania).
7. The Fox and the Hedgehog (South Slavonic).
8. The Tiger Finds a Teacher (China).

Have each group fill out the Story Structure Chart from Lesson 2A for their particular fable or tale. Ask students to compare the animals and their behavior in each story: Why do the types of animals change or not from one culture's fable to the next? How does the behavior change according to the type of animal? What types of behaviors lead to what types of endings in these stories?

Lesson 3 Sly as a Fox; Busy as a Bee

In fables and trickster tales, certain animals are associated with certain human traits - which animals have which human traits in which cultures? Do you associate these animals with the traits given to them in the stories?

Have students fill out the following chart online or as a downloaded, printed document. Ask them to list the animals in the fables they have read and heard, and then to list the corresponding traits. Then, ask students to add their own animals to the chart and to provide traits that they associate with these animals.

	Animal	Traits
From Stories		
Add Your Own		

Ask students what animal they would choose to be and why? What traits do they associate with their chosen animal? Could they think of a new form of made-up animal and give it the traits they would like to see in humans?

Lesson 4 The Moral of the Story

Often fables and trickster tales illustrate how a smaller or weaker animal uses cunning to outwit a stronger, more powerful animal. Why would this theme occur repeatedly in so many stories and across countries and cultures? What implications do such stories have for human society?

Look at the list of "Selected Aesop's Fables," located through the EDSITEment-reviewed Web site Internet Public Library and discuss the moral listed. Have students choose a moral and write an original fable to go with it, or have students make up their own fable with an original lesson/moral.

Extending the Lesson

- The American stories referred to as Brer Rabbit stories are actually Ananse Stories (the wise trickster spider) that were brought to the United States and the Caribbean by African-American slaves. To develop a history of this type of fable, have students trace the connections between the two sets of stories and locate the places in Africa and the U.S. and Caribbean where they stories are found. This topic also brings up questions about the roles and identities of the people who created the stories versus those who eventually wrote them down - Who is telling the story? Whose story is it? What is the relationship of the writer towards his or her characters?
- In their analysis of Uncle Remus' Songs and Sayings (selected text), located through the EDSITEment-reviewed Web site American Studies at the University of Virginia, Melissa Murray and Dominic Perella discuss the attitudes and intentions of Joel Chandler Harris, author of the Uncle Remus tales, in relation to the implications of the tales themselves:

- "Readers of Harris' Uncle Remus folk tales might be tempted to assume, as we were early in our research for this project, that the author had some kind of secret racial egalitarian agenda. Many of the stories he relates through Remus are clearly subversive of American apartheid's hierarchies. They spring from a tradition with roots in Africa, and also in Northern and Eastern Europe - the animal tale, with moral lessons about escape from submission and the value of cunning. In the hands of black Southerners in the nineteenth century, such stories clearly addressed their submissive situation. However, the tales must have had a second role as pure entertainment: if the stories were seen as basically subversive by their black tellers, would they have dared relate them to their white masters or bosses? One would doubt it, especially in the tense racial atmosphere of the 1880s and '90s."

- "Harris's understanding of his task is shaped by the latter definition; he sees the recording of Southern blacks' "poetic imagination" and "quaint and homely humor" as entertainment for whites and as a valuable anthropology of sorts, the preservation of a fading, picturesque voice. What Harris, a man who despite his anthropological efforts subscribed to most of his culture's white-superiority beliefs, failed to see is that the tales he recorded for posterity undermined the very culture he worked to stimulate" (*Remus Tales: Selected Text*).

- The following commentary serves as context for the first story of the collection, "Uncle Remus Initiaties the Little Boy" to the students. This story could be read to students and discussed in comparison to other animal tales in the lesson.

- "This tale functions as an important component of the larger text, *Legends of the Old Plantation*, in that it introduces the primary characters and establishes the stylistic form of the text. Immediately, the reader is introduced to Uncle Remus, Miss Sally, and the little boy; through the stories of Uncle Remus, we are introduced to the principal animal characters, Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox. One important aspect of the text's narrative style is the limited view that the reader gets of the characters. When we first are introduced to Uncle Remus, we do not see him as a first person narrator, but rather through the eyes of Miss Sally, whom we see through the eyes of an anonymous limited narrator. This is important to the text because it establishes a pattern of limited insight to the minds of the human charcters, while more detail is given to the thoughts of the animal characters. Harris also introduces the conflict of many of the animal tales, the pursuit of Brer Rabbit and his escape through the use of wit and cunning."

- "The tale also establishes the pattern in which the stories are told--by an elderly former slave to the young grandson of his former master. It is significant the Harris' storyteller be an elderly former slave. In this way, Uncle Remus provides a direct link to a past and culture that is quickly slipping away. For Harris, an advocate of preserving the Southern liteary heritage in the wake of the encroaching industrial expansion of the New South, the decision to commit the oral slave tradition to written form was a self-conscious attempt to solidf and preserve an endangered remnant of the old plantation culture. Moreover, the recording of these tales by Harris through the stories of Uncle Remus was a step toward the diversifcation of Southern literature. During the Reconstruction era, there was little African-American writing in the national level, and still less on the regional and local levels. Thus, the stories of Uncle Remus filled a tremendous void in acknowledging the culture of the African-American slaves, as well as the plantation culture Harris wanted to preserve" (*Editor's Commentary of "Uncle Remus Initiaties the Little Boy."*

- The legendary figure of Aesop is reported to have been a Samarian slave: "...it can cautiously be said that Aesop was probably a slave in the sixth century B.C., that he probably came from Phrygia and then lived in Samos, that he had a knack for "fables" (logoi) and that he became famous and gained his freedom on this account" - Leo Groarke Wilfrid, *The Recent Life of Aesop*. This point could extend the discussion of Lesson 4: The Moral of the Story, and lead to a discussion of the Aesop's fables and Uncle Remus stories in relation to slavery and unequal relations between different groups of humans.

- The EDSITEment-reviewed Web site American Studies at the University of Virginia has created one of its Ongoing Hypertext Projects on Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus and His Friends* (1892). The Web site, *Melissa Murray and Dominic Perella on Joel Chandler Harris, Uncle Remus* provides several Uncle Remus stories from Harris' book, accompanied by the editors' own social and historical commentary; background and contextual information on the Uncle Remus stories and on Harris, including four contemporary reviews of the Uncle Remus collections; a biography of Joel Chandler Harris; and some other essays and tales written by Harris that indicate Harris' attitude towards race relations.
- This online text, "Uncle Remus: Social Context and Ramifications" offer primary sources - original text and images - and their own commentaries in order to "make observations about post-Civil War black culture, and Southern society in general, using the stories and the reactions they engendered as points of reference ... [and] offer other students of the South one or two new insights into the region's endlessly complex myths and meanings" (*Melissa Murray and Dominic Perella on Joel Chandler Harris, Uncle Remus.*)

- Explain the differences between myths, legends, fairy tales, and fables. Give some examples of each type of story and let students ort them by category, or ask students to research their own examples of each of these narrative forms.

Selected EDSITEment Websites

- African Studies WWW
- K-12 Electronic Guide for African Resources on the Internet
  - K-12 Educational Resources (U of Wisconsin-Madison)
    - Bibliography on African Storytelling
- American Studies at the University of Virginia
- Cultural Objects: An Anthology of American Studies, Vol. II: Spring 1996
  - Cultural Objects Table of Contents<
  - *Melissa Murray and Dominic Perella on Joel Chandler Harris, Uncle Remus*
- Ongoing Hypertext Projects
- Joel Chandler Harris, Uncle Remus
- "Uncle Remus Initiates the Little Boy"
- Editor's Commentary of "Uncle Remus Initiaties the Little Boy"
  - Art and Life in Africa Online
    - Peoples Resources
      - Asante Information page
- Asia Source
- Myths and legends
  - Korean Folktales
    - "The Tiger in the Tra
- Internet Public Library

- Pathfinder: Fairy Tales Reading and Research
  - Folklore and Mythology Electronic Texts
    - Aesop's Fables: Online Collection
      - Selected Aesop's Fables
        - The Fox and the Cat and other fables of Aarne-Thompson type 105 about the dangers of being too clever

- Indian Fairy Tales, Jacobs, Joseph

EDSITEment Partner Site Resources:

ARTSEDGE Lesson Plans:

- Exaggeration, Folktales, and Characters

Other Information

Standards Alignment

1. ACTFL-2.1

   Demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied more

2. ACTFL-2.2

   Demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied more

3. ACTFL-4.2

   Demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and one's own more

4. NCTE/IRA-1

   Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works. more

5. NCTE/IRA-10

   Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.

6. NCTE/IRA-11

   Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

7. NCTE/IRA-12

Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information). more

8. NCTE/IRA-2

   Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience. more

9. NCTE/IRA-3

   Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. more

10. NCTE/IRA-4

    Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. more

11. NCTE/IRA-5

    Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes. more

12. NCTE/IRA-6

    Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. more

13. NCTE/IRA-7

    Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience. more

14. NCTE/IRA-8

    Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. more

15. NCTE/IRA-9

    Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.

16. NGS-1

    How to Use Maps and Other Geographic Representations, Tools, and Technologies to Acquire, Process, and Report Information from a Spatial Perspective

17. NGS-2

    How to Use Mental Maps to Organize Information About People, Places, and Environments in a Spatial Context

18. NGS-3

    How to Analyze the Spatial Organization of People, Places, and Environments on Earth's Surface

19. NGS-9

The Characteristics, Distribution, and Migration of Human Population on Earth's Surface

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